

# Facts & Information

August 1999

## 900 and 976 (pay-per-call) charges

### How to handle and avoid pay-per-call charges

#### Background

Pay-per-call services, which can be accessed by dialing numbers starting with 900 or 976, can result in charges on your phone bill. The UTC does not regulate companies that provide these services. But the UTC can help if you are having problems getting a disputed charge off your local telephone bill. The information provided below is designed to acquaint you with how the services are billed, what you can do to avoid them and what you should do if you have been unfairly charged for such services.

#### How pay-per-call services work

Pay-per-call services entice people to call their phone numbers with the promise of information or conversation. The lure of these services can be wide ranging but can also involve information or conversations inappropriate for minors.

When you dial a 900 or 976 number, the pay-per-call service provider bills you based on the length of the call and sends the billing information to your local telephone company to be included on your next phone bill. Some pay-per-call services accept credit cards.

#### The cost of the calls must be disclosed

Federal law requires that providers disclose the costs of their services in advertising and to begin calls costing more than \$2 with an announcement of the cost of the call.

The message must identify the company providing the service, state the cost of the call, and inform the caller that charges will begin three seconds after the tone following the message unless they hang up before that time. Companies are not allowed to charge consumers for calls terminated before the three-second period.

#### How to prevent 900 and 976 calls from being made from your phone

The UTC requires your local telephone company to block 900 and 976 calls from your phone line upon your request. The service is free for your residential telephone line the first time you request the service. You can have your line unblocked later, but you may be charged for any subsequent blocking requests. If you wish to block 900 calls from your phone line, contact your local telephone company.



P.O. Box 47250  
1300 S. Evergreen Park Dr SW  
Olympia, WA 98504-7250

Local: (360)664-1160  
Toll Free: 800-562-6150  
TTY: (360)586-8203

Web site: [www.wutc.wa.gov](http://www.wutc.wa.gov)  
Email: [info@wutc.wa.gov](mailto:info@wutc.wa.gov)

All UTC publications are  
available in alternate formats.  
Call (360)664-1133.

Putting a block on your phone does not necessarily restrict unauthorized calls to international pay-per-call services or pay-per-call services that bill through credit cards. Some pay-per-call providers have used toll-free numbers (such as 800 numbers) to connect a caller to a pay-per-call service. Federal law prohibits this action.

### **How to remove disputed charges from your local phone bill.**

You may request your local phone company send the charges back to the pay-per-call service provider. This process is also known as “recoursing” the charges. Recoursed charges will no longer appear on your local telephone bill, however, the pay-per-call service provider might still pursue collection of the charges. Also, it may take several billing periods for the charges to be removed from your phone bill.

If you experience any difficulties in getting a disputed charge removed from your phone bill, call the UTC consumer affairs line at 1-800-562-6150.

### **Do not pay a disputed charge just because it is on your phone bill.**

Your telephone company cannot disconnect your service if you fail to pay any charges associated with a pay-per-call service. Your phone service must be maintained as long as you keep current with the charges associated with your local and long-distance telephone service. When you pay a phone bill which contains a disputed pay-per-call service charge, be sure to indicate on the billing that your payment is for your local and long-distance charges only.

### **Children and pay-per-call services.**

Federal law prohibits companies from advertising or directing pay-per-call services to those under 12, unless the services are bona fide educational services dedicated to areas of school study. However, the telephone customers are responsible for any calls directly dialed from their phones. This includes children, baby-sitters, guests, etc.

If you believe your child was illegally exposed to obscene material via telephone, you should provide the Federal Communications Commission with details by writing or calling:

Federal Communications Commission  
Common Carrier Bureau  
Complaints and Investigation Branch  
Room 6206, M/S 1600A2  
2025 M Street NW  
Washington, D.C. 20554  
(202) 632-7553 (Toll-free 1-888-225-5322)

### **Report fraudulent activity**

You can ask questions and report suspected telemarketing fraud to the National Fraud Information Center, a non-profit organization founded by the National Consumers League. The center relays fraud reports to a variety of local, state and federal law enforcement agencies. Call the center toll-free at 1-800-876-7060.

## **How to file a complaint regarding a pay-per-call issue.**

The Federal Trade Commission suggests the following when dealing with pay-per-call billing disputes.

- 1) If the charges appear on your local telephone bill:
  - a) Write a letter to your local telephone company explaining why you should not be held liable for the bill and requesting a 900-number block on your telephone. Ask the telephone company to respond in writing within 15 days. Attach a copy of the telephone bill to the letter.
  - b) Send the letter by certified mail and request a return receipt.
  - c) Keep copies of dispute letters and responses for as long as six years.
- 2) If the bill is from the pay-per-call company, send your dispute letter directly to them and tell them you have requested a 900\976 number block on your telephone.
  - a) Be sure you have the correct address for billing disputes (often different from the address for payments) and send the letter by certified mail with a return receipt requested.
  - b) Send a copy of the letter to the FTC and indicate you have done so by writing at the bottom of the letter:

cc: Federal Trade Commission  
915 2nd Ave. Ste 2806  
Seattle, WA 98174

- c) Keep copies of your letter so you can use it to protest any collection action taken directly by the pay-per-call company. Always send dispute letters by certified mail and get a return receipt.
- d) Note: You may ultimately be held liable for pay-per-calls placed from your telephone. However, pay-per-call companies generally do not pursue such “first time” matters once the telephone company and the FTC have been notified, especially if a 900-number block is placed on your telephone. Nevertheless, keep copies of any dispute letters and responses for as long as six years.

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**If you would like more information or have questions regarding this process, you may call the FTC directly toll free at 877-FTC-HELP (877-382-4357).**